

The woman behind the bestseller on Pak Lah
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BY RITA JONG

Her long light brown-reddish hair stood out in the crowd in a coffeeshop in Bangsar as she fiddled with her Blackberry, sipping a glass of lemonade.

Wearing a printed green blouse and adorned with dangling pearl earrings, academic Bridget Welsh had a dark blue suitcase with her.

"I am going to the airport, leaving for Singapore after this interview," she said, flashing a warm smile with a firm handshake. Welsh specialises in Southeast Asian politics and was the co-editor of the much-talked about book on former prime minister Tun Abdullah Badawi - *Awakening: The Abdullah Badawi Years In Malaysia*, which is selling well in bookstores now. The other editor was James Chin.

She recently came under the spotlight after the media had, what she claimed, misconstrued the book as "Pak Lah's book".

The book, a collection of 37 articles by contributors, was decried by some for having re-opened old wounds between Abdullah and his estranged predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Welsh is also a familiar face and name to Malaysians for her appearances on Al Jazeera and other news organisations where she is consulted as an expert on Malaysian politics as well as regional affairs. She has been interviewed by The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, among others, and contributes frequently to MalaysiaKini.

Based in Singapore as an associate professor in Singapore Management University, Welsh, considers herself a "global citizen" as she has lived in different developing countries.

"My father, a Pennsylvanian, was a petroleum engineer who was working in Iran when he met and fell in love with my mother, a secretary-cum-horse jockey. I was born in Iran eventually. I am really lucky as I am considered to be the third culture kid where I am not of the culture of the community and have different roots and background," she said at a-mile-a-minute.

"I lived almost all my life in different developing countries like in the Caribbean, Latin America, Middle East, and I eventually came to Malaysia and went to high school in Kuala Lumpur."

This theatre lover said she was very fortunate that her parents were not the typical expat parents who lived in their little enclave.

"They wanted me to have local friends and experience local things. We would go on local trips and basically... just mingle with the locals. It wasn't until I was older that I really appreciated what they have done for me in giving me this opportunity to be what I consider myself as a global citizen."

In Singapore, some of her efforts include helping to raise funds annually for scholarships

and tuition for Burmese students in a village in the Irrawaddy Delta. She also raises funds for a charity in Hanoi that focuses on children with cancer.

But for all her charity work in the region, she feels the special tug of Malaysia. "I obviously love Malaysia because I keep finding myself coming back here," she said with a smile.

Despite being a mat salleh, Welsh said her high school years in Malaysia were just like any other Malaysian's.

"I would go out, have roti canai and teh tarik with my friends, I have the same newspaper man and the person who sells me my usual nasi lemak. These were the people who were part of my neighbourhood," she said, her electric blue eyes piercing through her rectangular frame glasses.

"I learnt to appreciate little things and trained to be analytical. As a political scientist, I have a certain degree of a critical lens in looking at the world and I consider myself as a public intellectual."

Welsh graduated from Colgate University (not the toothpaste, she said) and her Masters and PhD in political science were from Columbia University in The United States.

She also spoke of a scary experience where she almost went blind when in her teens.

"I had a detached retina problem. I had surgery in one of my eyes, and eventually on both, probably from reading too much in the dark," she said.

"I would never forget the time where I almost went blind. Everyone tells you that when you are blind, all your other senses come out. Until you experience it, you would never really appreciate the types of struggle of those who are blind."

Fortunately, Welsh's eyesight recovered, but she said she still could not see very clearly.

"My father had always wanted me to be a chemical engineer or a lawyer. I tried my hands at chemistry and I blew things up, so that was not a good idea," she laughed, as she threw her head back.

"While I have a tremendous respect for lawyers, I felt my added value was to think out of the box and not to work within the existing framework. At the end of the day, I know all my parents want is for me to be happy. And I am."

The authors, Chin and Welsh, at the launch of their book in Kuala Lumpur last week. The Malaysian Insider pic by Najjua Zulkefli, September 22, 2013. The authors, Chin and Welsh, at the launch of their book in Kuala Lumpur last week. The Malaysian Insider pic by Najjua Zulkefli, September 22, 2013. Welsh is indeed very passionate of what she does and having known her for 15 years, her co-editor Chin, too describes her as such.

"She is very passionate of her work and loves Malaysia," Chin said when asked to describe his friend.

So how does Welsh, who speaks nine languages, including Spanish and Malay, see herself in 20 years?

"Hopefully alive," she laughed as she leaned to the backrest of her bench.

"But on a serious note, I hope to continue the sense of civic responsibility through my teaching. I am most proud of my students' accomplishments as they are the ones who will guide the future of their countries."

And what would she be today if she had not spent the past 15 years teaching?

"Probably a lawyer," said Welsh with a smile. – September 22, 2013.

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